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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 001542

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/11/2014
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: VENEZUELAN OPPOSITION TESTS APPEALS MECHANISM

REF: CARACAS 1507

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor,
for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

1. (U) The Coordinadora Democratica conducted on May 8 a nationwide simulation of the May 27-31 appeals process ("reparos") for the presidential referendum signatures. Press reports estimate that about 950,000 people attended the one-day event, which was carried out peacefully. Signers were invited to go to 2,500 centers to check the status of their signature in the petition drive against President Hugo Chavez. Sumate representatives announced that evening they had registered some 25,000 volunteers to assist during the appeals process. On May 10, the National Electoral Council (CNE) published the results of the signature verification process in a 136-page supplement in at least one newspaper. The "success" of the simulation, however, was quickly overtaken by the GOV's revelation that it had captured 89 alleged Colombian paramilitaries near Caracas. End summary.

Signature Drill Reports Solid Turnout

2. (U) On May 8, the Coordinadora Democratica (CD) held a simulation to prepare for the May 27-31 appeals process for the signatures collected to petition for a recall referendum against President Hugo Chavez. Venezuelans who signed petitions in November 2003 went to some of the 2,500 locations where they signed to confirm whether their signatures had been validated or not by the National Electoral Council (CNE). Luis Enrique Palacios of the NGO Sumate, which helped organize the event, told reporters May 8 that more than a million people had gone to check their signatures (other press reports estimated 950,000). Sumate is now analyzing the participation to help Chavez opponents focus efforts on those who did not attend. Maria Corina Machado of Sumate told the press they had collected information on 25,000 volunteers to assist with the appeals process at the end of May.

3. (U) Those who attended the event received printouts from Sumate with the digital image of their signature and its status as determined by the CNE. Newspapers ran dozens of testimonials from frustrated Venezuelans whose signatures were not accepted. One woman reported that her signature and thumbprint appear totally normal on the Sumate image, but the CNE rejected the signature without sending it to the appeals process. The only reason given for the rejection on the CNE website is "no error," meaning that no formal rejection code was assigned to the signature. Another woman verified her information in the electoral registry beforehand and signed exactly as it appeared; her signature was rejected without appeal however, because the daily tally sheet corresponding to her signature was disqualified for "having amendments." Sumate provided persons whose signatures have been rejected without recourse to appeal with forms to complete so this alleged disenfranchisement will be documented.

4. (C) CD representative Jorge Casado told Polcouns May 9 he thought the event was a success. He pointed out that even in the remote state of Amazonas they were able to get 25 percent turnout. Heavy rain in some states was the only limiting factor, said Casado. He asserted that the turnout was affected because persons who had already learned their signatures were valid stayed home. A new concern, according to Casado, is that the government will counter the abstention of these types with Chavez supporters porting false identification. He also complained that in Carabobo, Henrique Salas Romer was becoming an obstacle and his Proyecto Venezuela had given only lukewarm support to the simulation.

CNE Publishes Identity Numbers

15. (U) Preparing for the appeals, the CNE published in the May 9 edition of Caracas daily Ultimas Noticias a 136-page supplement listing the identity numbers of citizens whose signatures were rejected or accepted in the Caracas District and the states of Miranda and Vargas. Each page lists more than 6,000 identity numbers in minuscule type and indicates the number of the voting center at which the signature can be appealed. Signers have also been able to check the status of their signature on the CNE website (www.cne.gov.ve), as well as that of Sumate (www.sumate.org).

Comment

16. (C) The opposition used the simulation as practice for a complicated process, an opportunity to recruit volunteers, and as a demonstration of popular support. The story of alleged Colombian paramilitary activity near Caracas has dampened the bounce the CD could have hoped for from this "success." As on other occasions, the GOV has set the agenda and forced the opposition to react to it.

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